Unqualified social work: 'a positive caring approach' for the Scottish private rented sector

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Unqualified Social Work: 'A Positive Caring Approach' for the Scottish Private Rented Sector

Purpose: The paper explores the emic theme of 'unqualified social work' as part of the process of property management in a self-described 'letting agency with a difference' in Edinburgh, set in the context of the rapid expansion of the private rented sector.

Methodology: The paper is based upon ethnographic data from participant observation in a letting agency and unstructured interviews with their employees.

Findings: The paper suggests that the shift in Scotland in terms of the provision of housing and housing-related services from the public sector to the private rented sector in recent decades has engendered new social and economic relations in which property managers become 'unqualified social workers'.

Practical implications: The paper aims to exemplify how anthropology and ethnographic research may contribute to the understanding of the private rented sector and of property management.

Originality/value: The paper aims to contribute to the wider literature on the private rented sector by foregrounding the role of the property manager. The paper also brings an analysis derived from the anthropology of ethics to an ethnographic understanding of property management and the private rented sector.

It is a Monday morning and I am sitting with Farhad, the Sales Manager, in the office of Almond & Thompson Edinburgh, a private letting agency, housed in a modern mill conversion in Leith, the city's historic port area. It is only for half an hour until Andy, one of the Property Managers, is ready to go with me out into 'the field', so Farhad briefly talks me through what he thinks I ought to know:

> *It's a bit dog-eat-dog in this business. We're a full management service. Sales view the landlord and the Director as clients. The Property Managers would view both the landlord and the tenant as clients. From Sales' perspective, it's about offering the landlord the best possible package. For example, landlords pay £25 a year for an out-of-hours service. If tenants have problems after 5pm, their phone calls get redirected to the head office in London. Most of the time, the problems are insignificant, but tenants often need reassurance and they will send someone out if necessary, so it gives the landlord peace of mind as well.*

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed a substantial shift in Scotland in terms of the provision of housing and housing-related services from the public sector to the private rented sector, including a substantial expansion of the latter during the past ten years. According to the 2016 Scottish Household Survey, the percentage of households in Scotland in the private rented sector increased steadily from 5% in 1999 to 10% in 2009 and then further to 15% in 2016. Meanwhile, the percentage of households in owner occupancy had increased from 61% in 1999 to 66% in 2005, but has since fallen back to 61%. More significantly, the percentage of households in social rented housing – covering council (i.e. state-owned) housing as well as independent non-profit housing associations, including co-operatives – fell from 32% in 1999 to 22% in 2009, but has remained stable since. However, if 'social housing' is broken down into council housing and housing associations, then the shift away from state-owned property is even more dramatic; just 13% of households were renting from local councils in 2016, compared with 27% in 1999 (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 48).

Almond & Thompson Edinburgh (a pseudonym) is the Edinburgh-based office of the Almond & Thompson Group. Founded in 1988, Almond & Thompson is a property management company that manages over 4,500 residential properties throughout the UK. Their head office is based in London, and they have branch offices in several major cities. According to their website, Almond & Thompson specialise in the provision of 'affordable housing models' that 'truly combine a positive caring approach to all of our clients with the commercial discipline of the private sector'. Note also the use of 'combine'; are we to understand that the private (rented) sector is not ordinarily 'caring', but does, nonetheless, have greater 'commercial discipline' than the public sector? Consequently, they employ staff from a range of backgrounds, including from the private sector, from local authorities and from housing associations. Indeed, many of their employees, including the Director, who left to work for a major housing charity during my fieldwork, are what Lewis (2012) terms sector 'boundary crossers', though in this instance between the private sector and the public and third sectors.

Tessa, the Director, describes Almond & Thompson as 'a letting agency with a difference'. Unlike most letting agencies in Scotland, they pay their landlords guaranteed rent, do not charge their tenants deposits, and provide active support for tenants who are in receipt of benefits. It is notable from my observations that the majority of properties managed by Almond & Thompson in and around Edinburgh are former council properties that were purchased by their former occupants under the Right to Buy legislation introduced in 1980 and have now found their way into the private rented sector. It is also the received wisdom within Almond & Thompson Edinburgh that many of their tenants are hoping to move into council housing as

soon as possible. Indeed, the lack of deposits charged to tenants in practice means that abandonment without notice is common – and the default explanation advanced by employees when this happens is that they have probably obtained a council house.

This paper centres upon one particular category of employee: the Property Manager, responsible for a portfolio of around a hundred rented properties. Not only do they come into regular contact with tenants, landlords, other letting agent staff, contractors and so forth; they also spend much of their working day driving around the city, walking up and down semi-private and semi-public stairwells, and viewing the insides of flats and houses. Almond & Thompson Edinburgh typically employ around six Property Managers, each covering a specified geographical section of Edinburgh and the surrounding area. The role, whilst hardly new for a private letting agency, must be understood in the context of the recent expansion of the private rented sector in Scotland. They find themselves, in their own words, taking on 'social work', apparently at least in part due to 'the nature of [their] clientele' and variations thereupon, and the sense is that this makes working at Almond & Thompson more 'challenging' than working at more traditional letting agencies. Such expressions may be taken as euphemistic references to class, or to the fact that a large proportion of their tenants are long-term benefit claimants. With the above in mind, this paper aims to follow the rhetoric and practice of care within the letting agency through the role of the Property Manager. How is the ethical manifested through their work in the context of the reduced role of the welfare state in housing provision?

I conducted fieldwork with Almond & Thompson Edinburgh from the autumn of 2014 to the spring of 2015 as the core component of a larger fieldwork-based research project into property relations in the Edinburgh private rented sector. Research methods included participant observation in the form of shadowing a range of employees in their work activities, and unstructured contextualised interviews. The methodology was inspired albeit not wholly guided by Actor-Network Theory, in particular that advanced by Latour (2005) in the sense that the project endeavoured to trace the associations encountered at relevant sites of action in the field with the view to reassembling the resulting social relations through the production of an ethnographic text. If the text is to be successful in performing the social, it must stage its actors so as to stabilise and compose the collected associations. After Tyler (1986), the resultant text aims to be evocative rather than merely descriptive or representative. Whilst this methodology was devised as part of an attempt to produce a broader ethnography of the sector and the complexity therein, there are nonetheless opportunities to consider its potential application in light of what Watson (2012) characterises as the 'everyday ethnography' of

organisations. At the very least, this paper aims to contribute towards exemplifying such a practice.

Making the Scottish Private Rented Sector

Before proceeding, it is worth briefly charting how this shift from the public to the private sectors has happened. Until the aftermath of the First World War, the most common domestic dwelling in urban Scotland was a tenement flat rented from a private landlord (O'Carroll, 1996), typically built and rented out privately by tradesmen who regarded build-to-let house construction as a worthwhile investment (Worsdall, 1979, pp. 53-54). After the First World War, local authorities started to undertake greater responsibility for working-class housing, initially with the construction of garden suburbs and cheaper three-storey tenement blocks in the 1920s (Worsdall, 1979, p. 11). It was after the Second World War, however, that housing in urban Scotland was transformed on a grand scale through state intervention with the construction of nearly one million new homes. Between 1945 and 1957, councils undertook large-scale development on suburban greenfield sites, mainly of family tenements, to relieve overcrowding in inner-city slums. From 1957 to 1969, central government sought to exert more direct control over the location and form of state housing with the view to integrating housing development with industrial incentives. Thousands of families were transferred from inner-city slum tenements to newly built peripheral schemes, new towns, and overspill estates adjacent to existing smaller towns. Slum buildings were demolished (Gibb 1989, pp. 157-159).

Widespread private ownership of individual tenement flats is a more recent phenomenon. By the 1970s, it was often more financially viable for landlords to sell property rather than continue letting it out. This frequently involved the sale of individual tenement flats after a tenant either moved out or died. In other cases, older landlords would sell off whole tenement blocks to new landlords, who would then refurbish the property with the view to either selling or letting the flats individually. Moreover, the policies of the UK Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s, in addition to the more famous Right to Buy scheme that gave council tenants the right to purchase their council-owned properties at discounted rates, also provided incentives for the expansion of the private rented sector. The introduction of the *Short-Assured Tenancy* in 1989 allowed landlords to set leases as short as six months. At the same time, rent controls were abolished, theoretically as a stimulating measure (McCrone and Elliot, 1989, pp. 229-233). Whilst the private rented sector experienced slow growth during the 1990s, more rapid growth has occurred since the 2000s as the introduction of buy-to-let mortgages in 1996 made landlordism more accessible to the middle classes as a form of asset-

based welfare, providing landlords with a safety net for retirement and so forth (Soaita et al, 2017).

Changes to the demographics of housing tenure in Scotland, especially during the latter part of the twentieth century, have engendered changes to the expectations of the state, especially local authorities. Currie (1996, p. 48-49) argues that this has coincided with a shift in the role of local authorities in the provision of housing from that of providers to that of enablers. Although they continue to play a significant part in ensuring that their residents are adequately housed, it is now less likely to be the local authorities themselves who provide the housing. Instead, local authorities have increasingly sought to secure housing via housing associations, housing co-operatives, urban renewal companies and other private house-builders. All in all, this has made for a much less monolithic mode of housing provision in which the state is much less directly implicated in the administration of housing.

The Short-Assured Tenancy was actually abolished in December 2017 when the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016 came into force, giving tenants increased security of tenure. Tenancies now last for as long as the tenant wishes to rent the property unless the landlord uses one or more of eighteen grounds for eviction, such as the tenant breaching the terms of the tenancy agreement or the landlord intending to live in or sell the property. Consequently, the specific politico-legal context in which the fieldwork upon which this article is based no-longer exists. Future research may, therefore, wish to revisit the themes discussed herein in light of the new legislation.

Ethics of Economy

The notion of 'a positive caring approach' at Almond & Thompson would at least appear to imply a sense of ethical regard through practice. Indeed, of particular interest throughout my broader research has been the role of the ethical in the practice of property management. In one sense, the posited link between property and ethics or morality is not new. Macpherson (1978, p. 4) argued that property is both a 'political relation between persons' and an 'enforceable claim'. Although this 'enforceability is what makes it a *legal* right, the enforceability itself depends on society's belief that it is a *moral* right'. Property as an institution, he claims, depends upon a 'justifying theory' (p. 11) or legitimising narrative through which the professed owners convince others that they should accept their claims of ownership. Wilk (1996, p. 38) outlines the notion of the 'moral economy', in which 'behaviour and choices are guided by the desire to do what is right, and these moral values flow ultimately from a *cosmology*—a culturally patterned view of the universe and the human place within it'. This has certain echoes

of Weber ([1905] 1930), who regards economic acts as products of social, personal and ethical conditions.

Csordas (2013, p. 536) argues that morality is not a cultural system, but rather, that 'the moral can enter into – spontaneously or by conscious evocation – virtually any corner of human concern'. The 'ordinary ethics' of Lambek (2010, p. 2), which is to say, an ethics that is 'relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself', has been methodologically useful. In characterising ethics as intrinsic to action, Lambek (2015, p. 129) argues that 'practice is always understood in relation to [ethical] criteria and based on judgment about the relevance of specific [ethical] criteria', and 'new [ethical] criteria are instantiated by means of illocutionary force or acts'. In this sense, the 'positive caring approach' might be understood as an ethical criterion in relation to which economic practice is played out.

Lambek (2008, p. 134) contrasts ethical values with economic values, arguing that the former are 'generally posited according to some absolute standard', whilst the latter are 'intrinsically negotiable and relative'. Economics, he argues, is concerned with choice, whereas ethics is concerned with judgment. Any absolute ethical values must, however, be 'qualified in and through lived practice' (p. 137) and are thus inevitably relativised. '[E]thical and market value are incommensurable to one another,' Lambek concludes, 'precisely because economics chooses between commensurable values operative under a single meta-value while ethics judges among incommensurable values or meta-values' (p. 145). Private sector property management may be understood as a site for potential economic conflict of interest and thus for ethical tension.

Of particular interest here, however, is how these negotiations between the ethical and the economic take shape in the context of socioeconomic change, in this instance, the rapid expansion of the private rented sector in Scotland. Robbins (2007, p. 311) suggests that 'situations of cultural change are particularly good ones in which to study the way morality shapes culture and experience' on the grounds that they 'often upend previously stable value hierarchies [and] generate the kinds of conflicts that push the morality of choice and freedom to the foreground'. This shift in the provision of housing and housing-related services from the public to the private sectors has produced particular kinds of moral and ethical reasoning, grounded in the practice of the new economic relations that have ensued. How might these come into play for the Property Manager?

Duty of Care

'Sales view the landlords and the Director as clients. Property Managers would view the landlords and tenants as clients.' That short exchange with Farhad in the opening vignette prompted reflection upon the notions of responsibility that obtain between diverse actors within the private rented sector. David, one of the Property Managers, outlines his perspective:

> *Officially, I'm employed as the landlord's agent. But particularly with the type of tenants we deal with just now, there's a lot of social factors involved where they might be struggling with money, with health, so I always want to make sure tenants are okay. So, I do feel like I have to be closer to tenants than landlords in terms of the relationship, more in a kind of duty of care responsibility to make sure they're able to cope and to point them in the right direction if they're going to fall down. There are people who are more irate than usual, or you can see them getting angry, or there's some tension building up, so it's just a case of managing that person at the time, and reassuring them that things will be done, to calm them down.*

Over the past year, David has had half a dozen 'out of the blue' calls from landlords asking him to serve notice on the tenants because they want to sell the property. When this happens, it his job to 'try to facilitate that the best [he] can' while being apologetic towards the tenants. 'I'm really the meat in the sandwich between the two,' he says, 'trying to keep both parties happy'. This, it seems, can be extended to much of the Property Manager's work – trying his best to facilitate the relations between tenants, landlords and property with the least detriment to any one party, whilst acknowledging that his ultimate priority is to the landlord as his or her agent, subject to certain legal constraints. There is a need, then, to shift between thinking with the tenant in mind and thinking with the landlord in mind in attempt to keep both sides happy, which presents challenges.

Let us return to Wilk's notion of the moral economy, whereby 'behaviour and choices are guided by the desire to do what is right' (Wilk 1996, p. 38). Does such a desire guide property management, or at least the management as practiced by Property Managers at Almond & Thompson Edinburgh? In a sense, yes, though, after Lambek (2010), with continuing reference

to specified ethical criteria, in this instance property law, signed leases, and in-house bureaucratic procedures and policies. The ethical, however, is not merely a function of the economy or indeed of property management; ethical reasoning is integral to the continuing management of property relations.

It may also be useful to consider this in light of the wider anthropology of care. Much of the literature is concerned with medicalised care (e.g. Heinemann, 2015) and with domains more conventionally associated with 'care work', such as care for the elderly (e.g. Brijnath, 2014; Buch, 2013; Mazuz, 2013). It may be useful to turn to Ibarra's depiction of 'emotional proletarians' in the service sector, defined as 'workers paid to perform not only routinized instrumental tasks, but also scripted emotional labor' (Ibarra, 2002, p. 345). Ibarra distinguishes between two categories of 'emotional proletarian'. On the one hand are those such as 'fast food servers, waitresses, and flight attendants' who 'school the expressions on their faces and modulate their tone of voice, faking feeling' in order to 'make customers feel good and produce profits for corporations'. On the other hand are those like the Mexican immigrant women private elder care providers in California in her study, who create their own routines and 'produce authentic emotion in exchange for a wage' (p. 346). The reader is invited to reflect upon the applicability or otherwise of this broader claim of a distinction between those employed to feign 'care' because it is in the interests of the business, and those employees whose work tasks lead to the production of what Ibarra calls 'authentic emotion'.

Unqualified Social Worker

Andy grabs his jacket from the coat stand and indicates to me that he is ready to go. I thank Farhad and follow suit, grabbing my sandwich from the fridge in the kitchenette as we head out through the faux-wood door, down the lift, out of the building and onto the street where Andy's car is parked. We get into the car and drive off, this time towards the Dalry area of Edinburgh.

Andy is employed as the Property Manager for the North of Edinburgh. He is twenty-nine, tall and thin, with wavy black hair, a groomed beard and bold black-rimmed glasses. He is wearing a waistcoat and bow-tie. He grew up in a suburban area of Edinburgh, but now stays in a small commuter town just outside the city boundaries in a private rented house with his girlfriend and 'the wee one', or his girlfriend's ten-year-old daughter. Andy has worked mostly in property management at a range of different companies since leaving school. Frequently, he is the first to arrive at the office in the morning and the last to leave in the evening.

‘This guy is a fucking pain,’ he says as he drives with Capital FM on in the background. ‘He was on the phone to me over an hour the other night, until about eleven.’

‘An hour? When you were at home?’ I ask.

‘Aye, he’s always doing it. Constantly. He asks me the same questions that he already kens [knows] the answer to again and again. He has my mobile number so he just calls whenever he’s wanting to complain about something. The shower and oven in his flat have broken, and he’s no satisfied with the way his fridge’s been cleaned, so now he’s saying the flat’s uninhabitable. He’s effectively moved out of the property and is threatening to withhold his rent.’

‘Oh *him*! Customer support folk were dealing with him the other week, I remember. Do you have to speak to them if they call you in the evenings?’

‘I probably shouldna [shouldn’t],’ Andy replies, ‘but I feel a duty to my tenants, and I couldna [couldn’t] get him to go away. In the end, I telt [told] him I had to go to bed, and he was shocked I wisna [wasn’t] just there for him twenty-four seven. I just dinna ken [don’t know] what some folk think.’

‘Christ.’

‘As I say, it’s five percent of tenants that take up ninety-five percent of your time. Most you hardly ever hear fae [from], and would maybe like to hear fae a bit more. But with some, it’s one thing after another. Thing is, I ken he has mental health issues, but I often feel like an unqualified social worker. We’re no actually trained to deal with this stuff.’

Andy continues to talk at length as he drives. I listen.

‘And the other thing is, some of these tenants have their own support workers who sometimes contact us too. This guy does. I think the support workers are sometimes egging the tenants on. Like, a tenant has telt their support worker that the flat’s uninhabitable, and then the support worker encourages them to withhold their rent, but they’ve no actually seen the flat for themselves, so they dinna ken if it’s uninhabitable or no.’

We park on one of the side roads in Dalry. This is an area of traditional sandstone tenements, probably from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

‘I’m gonnae hae [going to have] a cigarette first, so I dinna ken if you’re wanting to sit in the car?’

‘Aye, sure,’ I respond. Andy gets out of the car, takes off his blazer and puts on his black leather jacket. He wanders up and down the street smoking while I sit listening absentmindedly to Capital FM. A few minutes later, Andy opens the door, changes back into his blazer, and we head over to one of the entrances. Andy takes out a large bunch of keys, tries a few of them,

and eventually we gain access to the stairwell. There is a large skylight at the top, so it is not too dingy, though the floors could do with a clean.

After climbing two flights of stairs, we approach one of the doors. Andy knocks, waits a while, and then knocks again. 'Helloo?' No response. He pulls out the bunch of keys again, and begins trying them in the lock until one of them fits and lets us in.

It is a small one-bedroom flat. The bedroom is through a door immediately to the right and contains little more than a double bed and a chest of drawers. The next door along leads to the living room and kitchen, which is a single larger room with purple walls and a light wood-effect lino floor. The most noticeable thing in the living room is a large black-and-white photograph of a white tiger, perhaps a square metre in size, on one of the walls. Back into the hall, and immediately opposite the front door, is the door to the bathroom, which is a small windowless room containing a toilet, sink, and combined bath and shower. Andy wonders around the flat looking at the walls, ceilings, floors, windows, and kitchen work surfaces. He opens the fridge, frowns slightly, turns the hob rings on and off, tries the oven, tests the taps, checks the shower and goes to the toilet. I also wonder around, sometimes watching Andy, and at other times investigating the flat myself. It is true that the oven and shower are not working, but the hobs are fine, there is still a bath, and I can see no obvious problem with the fridge.

'Tell me,' Andy says to me after about ten minutes, 'is this flat *uninhabitable*?'

'No,' I answer, thinking of my own flat, complete with broken oven, broken heating, temperamental toilet and no living room.

'He should just terminate his tenancy now if he's no wanting to live here. The rent is only five-twenty a month for a one-bed in quite a central location. There's very few one-beds in Edinburgh, and certainly no at that price. I think it's just he's no wanting it any more, especially as he's threatening to withhold the rent. He should make it available for someone who needs it. Makes me so angry.'

We leave the flat and head back down the stairs, out into the street and back to the car. Sitting down, Andy briefly checks the schedule on his smartphone, pulls on his seatbelt and starts the engine. We drive towards Pilton, an estate consisting mostly of rows of council and ex-council tenements, built during the 1930s and 1950s. The area, Andy tells me, has a reputation for young joyriders who steal cars and motorbikes, and drive them recklessly around the area. The street, he tells me, makes a significant difference in terms of letting properties. Nobody wants to live on West Pilton Gardens, because that is where the joyriders drive. Flats on nearby West Pilton Lea, on the other hand, attract far more interest as it is a cul-de-sac.

Fifteen or so minutes later, we arrive on West Pilton Lea outside one of the characteristic tenement blocks. I've been here before, and there is still rubbish strewn about over the lawn in front of the entrance. The black wheelie bin appears to have been set on fire at some point. We leave the car and enter through the main door, which is already ajar. A large collection of houseplants greets us on the first-floor landing as we proceed to the front door of our next property. This time, it is for a viewing.

'I did have one applicant for this flat,' Andy tells me as we wait inside the empty flat for the prospective tenants to arrive. 'Australian woman with a wee one, just arrived in Scotland. It wouldna've been right for her. Lovely woman, perfect references and everything, but Pilton's just no the right area for her. She wouldna've got on well here at all. But I encourage Polish people to live in Pilton, because there are lots of other Polish people in the area, so I ken they'll have a good amount of support.'

*

I have always been struck by Andy's comment that he rejected an application for a flat in Pilton on the grounds that the 'lovely' Australian woman with 'perfect references and everything' would have been 'lonely' in what he regards as a 'dodgy area'. One might expect that Andy's objective would be to find tenants with the best possible references and background check results as they may be deemed more likely to pay their rent on time and take good care of the property, and to find them as quickly as possible. It is certainly not part of the Property Manager's formal job description to protect prospective tenants with 'perfect references' from 'dodgy' areas contrary to their own wishes – she had, after all, chosen to put in an application. Andy is of course a sample of one and, based on my experience with a range of Property Managers at Almond & Thompson in Edinburgh, takes personal involvement with his tenants to a relative extreme even within the 'letting agency with a difference' with its 'positive caring approach'. Nonetheless, the entry of idiosyncratic moral reasoning into the process of property management did not come as a surprise to me by this stage in my fieldwork either.

In light of this idiosyncrasy, it is useful to turn to Mattingly's notion of 'first person virtue ethics' in which the good is understood from a first-person perspective with narrative at the centre of moral action. Mattingly (2014, pp. 56-57) argues that 'the moral frameworks developed within first person virtue ethics offer a rich vocabulary for considering humans as "self-interpreting" moral beings whose perceptions, interpretations, and actions help shape moral subjectivities in the singular as well as the collective'. Moral striving may, therefore, be understood as 'experimental, even perilous, traversing private and public life while also deeply embedded in the routines of everyday care' (pp. 25-26). This does not occur separately from

everyday action as part of a 'deliberative ethical moment', but is instead 'accomplished in the midst of the everyday as the normative becomes subject to experiment and problematization' (p. 26). The Property Manager, in shifting between thinking with the landlord in mind and thinking with the tenant in mind, is continually confronted with new ethical dilemmas that, as part of their job, demand resolution. Hence the 'moral laboratory', to invoke the title of Mattingly's book, in which 'everyday spaces can become spaces of possibility, ones that create experiences that are also experiments in how life might or should be lived' (p. 27). It is through this process that Andy's authentic emotion – and, by extension, authentic care – come to the fore.

'In case it comes back to bite us'

'We need to head back to the office for a bit,' Andy tells me later on that day, sounding slightly nervous.

'Right enough,' I reply as we drive off. I don't give any further thought to his apparent nervousness as I sit in the passenger seat, mulling over our activities of the morning as we progress down Ferry Road. If talking on the phone to uncooperative tenants for hours after work is what the head office describes as 'commercial responsibility', then surely that is taking responsibility to a whole new level.

'Seriously, you can get way too involved with folk's lives in this job,' Andy says after a short while. 'I've got this flat in Restalrig just now. It's supposed to be just the mother and daughter, but the daughter's boyfriend has moved in and smokes weed in the flat. He's no even meant to be there, and I'm trying to get the mother and daughter to understand that they need to get him to move out as he's no on the lease. Thing is, I think they're scared of him. Last time I went there, he came out the bedroom in his boxers, shouting at me to get out. It's no even his flat! It's getting to the point where I'm saying to the mother and daughter that I'll have to serve an eviction notice on them if he disna [doesn't] leave as they're responsible for the weed smoking as they're on the lease. It's just gonnae be harsh on them as I dinna think it's their fault – I think the daughter's boyfriend is abusive and they canna dae [do] anything about it.'

We pull up outside the office, leave the car and head back in. Back in the office, I sit awkwardly with Andy, watching him read and answer emails and modify his diary. He says little to me directly. To break the awkwardness, I offer to make coffee, which he accepts.

'We need to do a void [empty property] report on this flat on Elgin Street,' Andy tells me after about half an hour. 'The tenant committed suicide last week. Nice guy. Only stayed there a few months.'

‘Christ.’ Clearly this is why Andy seemed nervous earlier.

‘It’s really upset the neighbours as well. Thing is, they’d had bad experiences of past tenants there, and I chose him because he seemed like he’d be quiet and responsible. Recently divorced professional working man and all that, ken what I mean. I ken it’s no my fault, but I find it hard not to blame myself in some way. Like, if only I’d spoken to him earlier, maybe I could’ve done something…’

‘I’m not sure you can hold yourself responsible for this sort of thing,’ I comment.

‘Aye exactly. The other thing is that his ex-wife has been round, and has taken out some of the furniture, and now his son is claiming it disna belong to her. I’m hoping we’ll no get too involved in that, but she’s also been on the phone telling us there’s a suicide note left in the oven. We’ll have to check that out as well.’

Andy retrieves a set of keys from one of the key cupboards. We put on our jackets, grab our bags, and once again head out of the office, down in the lift and out of the building to Andy’s car.

‘So… Elgin Street,’ Andy says as we drive off. ‘That’s off Easter Road, isn’t it?’

‘Eh… maybe?’

‘Right useful you are,’ he half-jokes in response.

Elgin Street, and indeed much of the surrounding area, is populated with four-storey sandstone tenements, mostly built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with higher ceilings and cornicing, larger and often bay windows with decorative features above, and wider stairwells with coloured tiles. We enter one of the tenement stairwells. It is getting dark now, and only one of the stair lights is working.

‘I’m gonnae check on the neighbours first,’ Andy tells me as we approach the second-floor landing. There are three flats on each floor. Andy knocks on two of the doors in succession, but there is no response. ‘I’ll have to come back to them later, just to make sure they’re alright.’ Andy then unlocks the third door and we go inside. The lights are already on.

‘First things first,’ Andy says, leading me into the kitchen. The kitchen looks to be quite recently refitted and redecorated, with magnolia-painted walls and a light wood-effect floor. Something about the heavy fire door, the room’s total lack of windows, and the ceiling that is higher than its length or breadth strikes me as eerie, though perhaps it is just because of the circumstances. Andy kneels down in front of the oven, gulps, and opens it. ‘Phew. Nothing there. Either the ex-wife has taken it, or she’s just trying to wind us up.’

Andy then carries out the process of the void report. With the aid of the void report form, he switches on the heating, turns the lights, taps, oven and hob rings on and off, opens and

closes the windows, and briefly assesses the state of walls and floors. I finally manage to make myself useful by writing down the gas and electricity meter readings as Andy calls them out while standing on tiptoes on a chair. The living room is indeed partly furnished – there is one sofa, though it would appear from the marks in the carpet that other items have been removed. The bedroom is untidy, with a few items of clothing strewn over the bed.

'The thing is,' Andy says to me, looking scared and upset, 'I dunno how he done it.'

'Hmm,' I reply, imagining a handful of possibilities.

'I'll try the neighbours one more time,' Andy says as he turns off the heating and lights. We leave the flat. Andy knocks on the neighbouring doors once more, but still no response.

'What will happen to this flat now?' I ask as we leave the building and walk back towards the car.

'Contractors will come and clean the place and remove any remaining furniture. Then it'll be remarketed and hopefully re-let. But we'll have to inform any future prospective tenants what happened – in case it comes back to bite us, ken what I mean.'

*

Let us return to Ibarra's dichotomy between formal and informal 'emotional proletarians', and consider how Andy's activities as a self-described 'unqualified social worker' may fit into it. On the one hand, the strong sense of responsibility that he displays towards his tenants contributes indirectly towards the continuation of their tenancies and thus ultimately towards their financial returns. On the other hand, despite being 'unqualified' and thus not specifically employed to perform social care duties, Andy displays what Ibarra would term 'authentic emotion' as part of his job, frequently going above and beyond what might be expected from his job description. Indeed, in this latter instance, it would appear that Andy's duty of care even extends to protecting potential future tenants from the flat's own agency, lest they be haunted by the legacy of the suicide (cf. Miller, 2001).

In the context of home care of older adults in Chicago, Buch (2013) argues that home care workers often find themselves conflicted between their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those for whom they care, especially in the context of their relatively low wages. 'Through intimate and daily acts of care,' Buch argues, care workers 'repeatedly enacted broader social hierarchies within and on their bodies—they came to feel that their immediate bodily needs were less important than those they cared for' (p. 647). Certain parallels should be readily apparent, though less clear is the extent to which Andy enacts 'broader social hierarchies', given that he also acts as an authority figure to some of his tenants as well as prioritising their wellbeing over his own. At best, his socioeconomic positionality is ambiguous.

On the face of it, however, 'care' may be regarded as ancillary to the role of the Property Manager, even though the practice of ethics is present within the process of property management. Andy's 'unqualified social work' in effect contributes to the stated 'positive caring approach' of Almond & Thompson, and helps tenants to sustain their tenancies, pay their rent on time and keep their homes in good condition, ultimately if indirectly contributing to the financial returns of both the letting agency and their landlords.

Conclusion

This article began with a cursory unpacking of Almond & Thompson's stated aim to 'combine a positive caring approach to all of [their] clients with the commercial discipline of the private sector'. Some sense of care and social responsibility is in evidence from our Property Managers in this instance. Almond & Thompson's formal mission statement, and indeed their wider business model, were of course not written by any of the Property Managers encountered in this chapter. It was not even written by anyone in the Edinburgh office, but is rather a product of central management based largely at the head office in London. I had no direct interaction with the London office during fieldwork, and it is not often a highly visible actor for most employees of the Edinburgh office either. Of more immediate concern, therefore, is not the mission statement itself, or the motivations of higher-level management, but the ways in which Edinburgh-based employees negotiate and, where applicable, reproduce these values or virtues through their work with tenants, landlords, properties, state bodies and other actors, as it is through these associations that the relations of property, responsibility and care within the private rented sector are continually constituted.

Van Eijk (2017) argues that the privatisation of care increases costs and adds additional bureaucratic levels. It is beyond the remit of this article to address the relative financial merits of different housing models, but I cannot avoid the conclusion that the large-scale transfer of council-owned properties into the private rented sector has led to additional layers of payment, profit and management. Almond & Thompson may be a 'letting agency with a difference' in providing additional support services that would previously have been provided by the state, but these are, at least as far as their business model is concerned, a means to ensure that privately rented properties are suitably maintained and that rents are paid on time. Their mission statement, and indeed the actions of their employees, may appear to distance themselves from 'politics' in pursuit of a 'positive caring approach' and 'efficiency'.

What does seem clear to me is that the current economic and political context engenders a particular state of affairs for the private rented sector in which the lines between business and social care are blurred. Does this new social, political and economic reality itself engender particular types of ethical relations? Whilst I do not seek to speculate as to possible alternatives, it does occur to me that the politically fragmented nature of rented housing in Scotland today, with competing and perhaps contradictory interests at its core, lends itself well to an analysis derived from the anthropology of ethics, or at least in the sense of 'ordinary ethics' in the vein of Lambek (2010) – an ethics that is grounded in everyday practice. Returning to Mattingly (2014, p. xvi), I argue that taking 'people's moral projects and their beliefs about the good seriously' – what she terms 'first person virtue ethics' – can shed light on how the process of property management is played out in practice, which itself is integral to an ethnographic understanding of the private rented sector.

There are two major caveats, however. One is that this self-styled 'letting agency with a difference', with its 'positive caring approach', is not typical of the private rented sector in general (see e.g. Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2018). The other is that the very nature of property relations in the private rented sector, with all their implications of vested interests and inequalities of ownership, by definition imposes certain constraints – or at least disincentives – upon the virtues that may be freely and explicitly espoused or practiced. In certain respects, this is somewhat reminiscent of the alleged contrast between politics and humanitarianism as critiqued by Fassin (2007). Fassin argues that there has in fact been a tendency towards the merging of politics and humanitarianism, and that claims to the contrary can 'relegate the dominated and the excluded to this depoliticized space, leaving the political space to the dominant and the included', and risks 'denying the possibility of a political life to those who are subjected to them in practice' (p. 509). These ideas also have echoes of *The Anti-Politics Machine* by Ferguson (1990). Future research may wish to consider whether the economic reality of private property serves to 'depoliticise' activities such as 'caring' property management. There may, after all, opportunities for property managers to be politically engaged, and indeed many are tenants themselves. For now, however, my primary comment is that ethics or 'the good' – including any first-person virtue ethics – is always ultimately contextual within the constraints of the wider political economy, as agentive ethics are always mediated through historically constituted circumstances and relations.

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